

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 4, 2022)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: A Three-Dimensional Christmas
(The birth of Jesus from John, Matthew, and Luke)

The Word Became Flesh

(John 1:1-14, 18)

Study #1

Introduction: When all is not well...

My father passed away in May of 2002. A year before he died, failing health made it necessary for Dad to move into an assisted living facility.

After his move, Kathy and I drove to Dallas to help my twin sister, Kathi, empty Dad's home of thirty-four years.

As those of you who have gone through that experience know - and as those who haven't yet should know - emptying your parent's home will expose a few raw emotions. The experience may also expose a few long-hidden treasures.

Among our "finds" were items that hadn't seen the light of day in over thirty years. Namely, artifacts from my grandfather's (my dad's dad) service in the US Army during World War I.

In Dad's attic, we found my grandfather's hob-nailed boots, his backpack, his first aid kit, his flashlight ("torch"), a very heavy rifle, and his GI gas mask, used to guard against the mustard gas that was used in The Great War.

My grandfather marched with all this paraphernalia across the battle fields of France in 1917-18.

Then, in Dad's study, we found letters my grandfather had written to his new bride (my grandmother) from Europe.¹

All of these treasures are now all stored at our house, including those dozen or so postcards that were sent home to Texas.

None of these postcards had much writing on them. I suspect there wasn't much time to write long letters from the trenches. But they all contained one phrase, "*All is well.*"

I picture my grandmother, then in her early twenties, hurrying to the Post Office to see if there was word from the front. Yes! A card from her husband: "*All is well.*" Just what she needed to hear.

In the middle of a war thousands of miles away, my grandfather knew that his wife needed assurance that all was well.

In our world, there are plenty of arenas in which things are not at all well. More personally, we meet situations that cry for just such a word. We want to know that "*All is well.*"

- You want a call - or at least a text - that your child has arrived safely.
- You want a good report from your doctor after biopsy.

At these moments, we are desperate to hear, "*The problem has been dealt with. All is well.*"

We have financial and career needs, health needs, relationship concerns. However, most crucially, we are needy toward God.

We want to hear from Him that the problem caused by our sin, the problem that would keep us alienated from God, has been dealt with and that "*All is well*" there, too.

So, over the next few minutes, as we explore the opening verses of the Gospel of John, we're going to see the amazing way in which God has dealt with our PROBLEM. And we'll discover that, yes, all is well.

¹ From a couple of old photographs, I discovered that my grandfather had received some of his training for the war right here in San Antonio at Ft. Sam Houston. (at that time, Camp Travis)

This close to Christmas, it makes sense that we would open to the beginning of one of the New Testament's four records of the life of Jesus. The opening chapters take us to the start of Jesus' story.

But John's Gospel starts very differently than Matthew, Mark or Luke. The other three Gospels start with a narrative of His birth (Matthew and Luke) or of His ministry (Mark). John reaches back in time way before that.

The Apostle John starts his Gospel at the beginning. The **very** beginning, introducing us to what he calls "**The Word.**"

The Word - Before the Beginning (vv. 1-5)

The Word and God (v. 1)

[John 1:1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John writes as a believer in Jesus, through and through. But, both before and after he believed in Jesus, he was a Jew, through and through.

From his earliest days John had been immersed in the teachings of the Old Testament. What we, today, call "the Old Testament" was John's Bible.

So, when we read the word "**Word**" here, we should have our Old Testament ears on. And in the Old Testament, "**the Word**" was God's communication to people.

When John wrote about "**the Word**" he was thinking of the phrase that is repeated in the prophets, "**THE WORD OF THE LORD came to...**" this or that prophet.

What followed "**The WORD OF THE LORD**" was usually some special message from or about God.

So, whatever John is going to say here about "**the Word**" in what follows, we can be certain that he is going to relay some communication from God to us.²

The first two verses of John's Gospel fill in some details about **The Word.**

FIRST, **The Word** is eternal. We might guess from the wording of that first phrase that John had Genesis 1 in mind as he sat down to write the Prologue to His Gospel - and we would be right.

Genesis 1 starts, **[1:1] In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.** John 1 starts, **[1:1] In the beginning was the Word.**

So, **the Word** didn't have a beginning point. At the earliest moment we can imagine, **the Word** had already eternally existed.

SECOND, **the Word** stands in close relationship to Almighty God - **and the Word was with God.** In the beginning, God was not alone in His uncreated universe. **The Word** was with Him.

THIRD, **the Word**, while clearly a separate entity from God because it was in relationship with God, "**...the Word was God.**"

As John continues, we learn more about **the Word.** Now that we understand (really?) **the Word's** relationship to God, we learn about **the Word's** relationship to creation.

The Word and Creation (vv. 2-5)

The Word is the Creator (vv. 2-3)

² Some believe that "the Word" John envisions in this passage has as its historical reference something out of the world of Greek philosophy, as in the Gnostic idea of some special knowledge, or "logos" (word) that leads to eternal life. But John was not a Gnostic and the Jewish world view out of which he wrote was not one that embraced or even dealt with Gnosticism, a (2nd century) church heresy.

[2] *He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being.*

From Day One forward, **the Word** was the prime creative force in the universe.

The book of Hebrews tells us that **[11:3]...the worlds were prepared by the WORD of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.**

John gives us more information about **the Word**, calling **the Word "Him."** **The Word** is personal.

And there is yet more to learn about **the Word**. John next tells us that **the Word** is the source of all life.

The Word is the Sustainer and Illuminator (v. 4)

[4] In Him was life, and the life was the Light of mankind.

John isn't saying that **The Word** is alive. You and I and all animals and plants are alive. That is different than having LIFE in us.

All life on our planet derives that life from some external source. You and I are all *dependent* for our existence on air, food, water, clothing and shelter. Take these things away and we perish.

The Word, though, has LIFE *independent* of anyone or anything else. Take everything else away and **the Word** lives on.

Further, **the Word's** life force can be transferred to people like you and me. The Word transfers **life** in the form of **light** - a light that, as John now tells us (v. 5), is always shining.

The Word shines in the darkness (v. 5)

[5] And the Light shines³ in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp⁴ it.

³ The Greek tense of the verb "shines" is present, indicating on-going activity.

John pictures a pitched battle between dark and light. The light is energized by **The Word** and **the Word's** light wins over the darkness.

We're not surprised. Light is more powerful than darkness. It's the nature of light to dispel darkness.

Shine your flashlight in the darkest room and the light will illumine the darkness. In fact, the darker the room before you turn on your flashlight, the more striking will be the light.

Darkness simply can't stand before the light. And the light that **the Word** shines triumphs over the darkest darkness.

So, what do we now know about **the Word**? Well, we know this:
 He is the communication of God.
 He is eternal and He exists eternally alongside God.
 He is God, the Creator.
 He is personal.
 He has independent life.
 He shines.

Hold on to those thoughts, because now John takes us on a major shift in focus.

After a series of rather vague references to some cosmic, unidentified **Word**, John becomes very concrete and down to earth. He starts talking about a man - John the Baptist!⁵

The Word - and John the Baptist (vv. 6-8)

John the Baptist - What a Wonderful Wild Man! (v. 6)

[6] A man came, one sent from God, and his name was John.

⁴ Or the translation I prefer "overpower."

⁵ This "John" is NOT the author of the Gospel of John. The author of the Gospel of John was one of the twelve Apostles. He wrote this book, the three short letters (1, 2, and 3 John) and the book of Revelation. John the Baptist was the forerunner who announced Jesus' arrival at the beginning of His ministry.

As I have grown in my understanding of him, I have come to see John the Baptist as one of the most fascinating and enjoyable and provocative characters in the New Testament.

He was a holy wild man. He didn't live in the cities of ancient Israel. He lived out in the remote wildernesses of the desert. He wore a scratchy camel's hair garment and ate locusts and wild honey.

With raw courage, he called the Jews to repent, to turn to God.

He spoke truth to power. He rebuked Pharisees and kings. He feared nothing but God.

He didn't seem to care whether people followed him or not. Yet people followed him.

All John cared about was following, serving, and speaking for God. John was all authenticity and integrity and passion.

And John the Apostle tells us that John the Baptist's sole role in life was to draw attention to the Light that **The Word** shines.

John the Baptist - What an Amazing Mission! (v. 7)

[7] He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. [8] He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

In the ancient Jewish culture, if a witness was to be credible, he had to be willing to lay down his life for his testimony. To be a witness was to be willing to be a martyr. In fact, the Greek word for witness is "martyr."

The same thing is true today. To be a witness is to commit. If I am called to the witness stand in a court of law and testify that "such and such" is true, I am no longer neutral. I've taken a stand.

If what I testify to is NOT true, and I know that it is not true, I have committed perjury and I will go to jail. As a witness, I have to speak the truth.

John spoke as a witness to the truth of **the Word**. He staked his life on the claim that **the Word** was true.⁶ He wanted everyone he met to believe in the trustworthiness of **the Word**.

John wasn't interested in tooting his own horn. He didn't want people to believe in him. John wanted people to believe in **the Word**.

So, **the Word** is the Hero, the Star of our passage, and the object of John's testimony. Back and forth, the author shifts our focus.

First, we look at **the Word**. Then, we see John the Baptist. Next, we zero in again on **the Word** that shines His light.

The Word - In the Flesh! (vv. 9-14)

Rejecting the True Light (vv. 10-11)

[9] This was the true Light that, coming into the world, enlightens every person. [10] He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him, and yet the world did not know Him. [11] He came to His own, and His own people did not accept Him.

Did you catch that? Up until this point, we know that The Word was personal, but maybe a bit distant. Stand-offish. A Person set apart.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This Person came to the world He had created and went unrecognized by that world.

This Person who was **the Word** offered Himself to the world He made. And the world He made flatly rejected Him.

Now, if, when you first walked in to church this morning, you didn't know the identity of **the Word** in John chapter 1, by now you have a pretty good idea as to who He is. Our sleuthing is over. **The Word** is Jesus.

Jesus, **the eternal-creator-God-Word**, came home to the world He created. He went to His own people - the Jews - who made up the

⁶ John lost his life for that testimony. (See Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9)fs

nation that had been chosen and blessed by God. The Jews were the people who had always received **the Word** from God.

But, when **the Word** came home, He didn't receive a warm homecoming. No, His entire life was one long rejection. People who should have received Him with open arms pushed Him away.

He was ultimately rejected by everyone - Jews and non-Jews alike - on what we call "Good Friday" when He was crucified by Rome.

That ultimate rejection was completely consistent with the rejection He received from His own people throughout His three years of public ministry.

But rejection was Jesus' life story. Go back to the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and you'll find rejection there, too.

The rulers of the Jews didn't bother to travel the seven miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see Him when the Wise Men announced that the Jewish king was there. (Matthew)

And before that, nobody would make room for His mother to give birth in an inn at Bethlehem. (Luke)

Rejection was His story, start to finish. But He never stopped offering Himself to that rejecting world. And for those who did not reject Him, there is GOSPEL.

Receiving the True Light! (vv. 12-13)

[12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, [13] who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.

There are two things - and only two things - that anyone can do with Jesus. That includes you and me.

We can reject Him, or we can receive Him. There is no middle ground. To receive Him is to "**believe in His Name.**" And when someone believes in His Name, he or she becomes a child of God.

So, the story of **the Word** is, ultimately, not the tragic story of rejection. It is the incredibly GOOD NEWS story that anyone who receives Jesus (that is, who believes in Him) is welcomed into God's forever family.

And that is the Gospel. It isn't tricky and it's not complicated. There is nothing confusing about it.

It is a simple matter of deciding who you are going to trust for LIFE, eternal life.

It is clear now that John is talking about Jesus in the opening words of his Gospel. So, now, it finally, makes sense that I have chosen to speak from John 1 this close to Christmas. It's a perfect fit.

In fact, the next phrase of the passage IS Christmas morning. John unwraps the gift - the gift that IS Jesus! - for us.

The Word Became Flesh! (v. 14)

The Word camped out with us (v. 14a)

The Word Incarnate

[14a] And the Word became flesh...

The Word - God, the eternal Creator - became flesh and blood. This is the clearest and best statement of the truth we celebrate every Christmas found anywhere in the Bible: ***the Word became flesh.***

Divinity took on toenails. God developed kneecaps and molars.

This is the heart of Christianity: that God took communication to the Nth degree. The message went beyond the written or the verbal. ***The Word*** became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The Word - with us!

[14a] And the Word...dwelt among us...

When John tells us that **“the Word dwelt among us”** he uses a term that the ancient Greeks used to refer to living in a tent.

Now, I’ve spent my share of nights in a tent. I like camping. But I wouldn’t want to camp permanently. I like living in a house with sturdy walls and a solid floor.

If you wanted to say that someone had lived and settled down in a certain village, you would not use the Greek word John used here.

But if you wanted to describe someone who was just passing through, someone who didn’t plan on putting down roots, someone who was camping, this word, **“dwelt,”** was how you said it.

And the point is that Jesus never planned to make earth His permanent address. During His first stay on earth, He didn’t intend to set up an earthly Kingdom. (THAT will be what His second trip to earth will be all about...)

Two thousand years ago, when He came to earth, He was just camping out. From the very beginning, He planned an early exit. He intended to die on the cross for your sins and to be **[John 1:29] the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

But there is something else about this term, **“dwelt,”** that I want you to notice.

During the forty years when the Jews wandered around in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, they carried the tabernacle around with them.

The tabernacle was the portable tent where the Jews worshiped God.

The tabernacle housed the presence and the glory of God. Our word **“dwelt”** (John 1:14) could easily be translated **“tabernacled.”**

And by using this word, John tells us that during His earthly life, Jesus was the location for the presence and the glory of God. And that is exactly what he goes on to say.

The Word revealed the grace and glory of the Father (v. 14b)

[14b]...and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

When I think of beholding God’s glory, I usually imagine visions, miracles, Mt. Sinai lightning, and showy demonstrations of power. John says that the glory of God was revealed when Jesus walked around on the footpaths of Palestine **“in the flesh.”**

And the earthly Jesus is how we get to “see” God.

Jesus, the Word, Revealing God to Us (v. 18)

[18] No one has seen God at any time. God, the only Son, who is in the arms of the Father, He has explained Him.

When Jesus was born in the stables in Bethlehem, when **the Word** became flesh, the stage was set for us to learn all we would ever need to know about God.

- At the wedding in Cana, we see God’s heart for joy and celebration.
- In the cleansing of the temple, we see God’s fierce holiness.
- In His parables, we hear God’s wisdom.
- At the feeding of the 5,000, we see God’s compassion.
- At the cross, Jesus revealed God’s justice and love.
- At the empty tomb, we see God’s power.

Throughout His lifetime, Jesus explained (i.e., *exegeted*) the Father.

So, yes, it is true that no one has ever seen God the Father in His unveiled majesty.

It is also true that when you, by faith, enter LIFE by **the Word** that became flesh, you come to understand all you need to know about God.

Conclusion:

The world is broken, the devastation created by our rebellion against God is ugly, and sin has made a mess of everything. You and I are all glorious, made-in-the-image-of-God wrecks.

Our sins have caused a problem - and it's a problem we can't deal with. We are lost. And in our lostness, we need assurance from God that all is not lost, that there is hope.

What we all have always needed from God is a communication, a message, a **Word** that *"All is well."*

When my grandfather wrote to my grandmother from the frontlines of World War I and told her *"All is well"* he didn't mean that he was having the time of his life.

She understood that things were tough down in the trenches. What he meant was, *"I am alive!"*

"All is well" is the big picture summary.

"Mary Grace, it's cold, and I can't get the mud out of my boots. The tent leaks and there is barbed wire everywhere. The bullets fly and the danger is real. But, in the big picture, in the grand scheme of things, all is well. I'm still breathing."

On Christmas morning, two thousand years ago, God sent **the Word**. And the message **the Word** brought was this:

"I'm going to deal with your PROBLEM. My Son will become one of you. He will put on flesh. He will gasp for air, just like any newborn. He will learn to walk and run like any other kid. He will grow and mature into adulthood. He will show you what I am like. And at the end, He will die a terrible death for your sins. But then, He'll rise from the dead so that anyone who believes in Him will have LIFE, eternal LIFE."

God never intended through Jesus to take away the pain of living in a fallen world. There are still problems and pains, heartaches and struggles.

But, through faith in Jesus, with respect to the things that matter most, *"We are bound for glory. God is our Father. And all is really, really well."*

Merry Christmas! **The Word** became flesh! Spread the word!